

Diversity Statement

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I have found that one over-privilege that accrues to me as a white man is to have my opinion taken seriously by default in many situations, even if I do not know what I am talking about. Given this, if I am to live up to my responsibility to help create a more just and inclusive society, I have to actively work to ensure that my actions and words respond to the experiences of the under-privileged, and not my own limited perspective. At the same time, surrendering my own privilege does not simply mean passively taking no action. How to balance the need to act, but in a way that does not simply amplify my own privileged viewpoint? My answer is to try to “take action in response to expressed, felt need.”

Expressed, Felt Need. Padre Greg of the San Lucas Tolimán mission in Guatemala taught me a wonderful phrase which, to me, encapsulates the importance of listening before helping: to act on behalf of another community only in response to “expressed, felt need,” meaning need which is spoken openly, not guessed at, and which is sincerely felt, not based on the expectations of the powerful. As a education Peace Corps volunteer in Kazakhstan, I witnessed extreme versions of institutional failures to listen. For example, a development organization provided the elementary school I worked in with an expensive computed lab. When an organization representative visited (once, for a single day), the lab was unlocked, and a show lesson was put on for their benefit. Otherwise, the computers sat entirely unused. The organization meant well, but responded to its own beliefs of what our school needed, rather than responding to expressed, felt need.

Though the examples are extreme in international development, it is just as important for university faculty and students to listen before taking action. For example, I was asked by the Statistics Department at UC Berkeley to serve on a student panel on increasing diversity and representation in the department. Those of us on the panel had clear ideas of what would help, but, by their nature, such panels usually consist of graduate students who are already succeeding. Recognizing this bias in ourselves, we took it upon ourselves to conduct open-ended interviews with all the grad students in the department to ask what would improve the UC Berkeley grad school experience. We took especially seriously the recommendations of under-represented minorities and women. The results were eye-opening. None of the panel’s original ideas (such as a student paper seminar) were very popular, but there was broad and vocal support for other reforms that we hadn’t initially considered (such as clearer requirements for the qualifying exam).

Taking action. In response to expressed, felt need, university faculty can take action to promote equity and justice within the university in at least two qualitatively distinct ways. One is through personal relationships, such as via mentorship, advising, and teaching. The other is through official programs, such as departmental outreach or diversity events.

I believe that personal relationships are the best opportunity for real social change, and university faculty have the opportunity to forge many meaningful relationships with students. Professors can help students feel that they belong by cultivating an inclusive, welcoming classroom environment. Students are more likely to remain in a program of study when they have a sense of belonging and community, which professors can facilitate by encouraging collaborative work both in and out the classroom. For example, one of the initiatives that came out of the aforementioned UC Berkeley diversity panel was a strengthened student mentorship program, which I participated in as a mentor.

Finally, I believe that official programs to promote diversity, such as department panels, outreach programs, and discussion-based events can be effective when done well, in a way that engages supportive, productive conversation, articulates and reinforces community standards, and leads to concrete institutional changes. I also believe that such efforts are most fruitful when led by faculty who are members of the under-represented group whom they are intended to serve, which, regrettably leads to an extra burden for such faculty. In recognition of this, the more privileged faculty can play a useful subordinate role without usurping leadership. As an example from my own experience, in response to the George Marcy sexual harassment scandal at UC Berkeley, two female PhD students in statistics wanted to organize a department-wide “diversity lunch” to discuss issues related to sexism in the statistics field, and they asked me to help. I provided as much material help as I could to ease the burden on the organizers (emailing, gathering resources, presenting). And (in the words of the organizers) my active presence served to signal that sexism was not simply a “women’s issue,” but a problem that affects and should engage everyone. This is always the case with diversity, inclusion, and justice!